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ABSTRACT

The strategic interaction method is based on the principle that dramatic tension is the essential ingredient in second language learning, but unlike the drama built on audience spectatorship, classroom drama builds within each student involved in the interaction. Students take scenarios, thematically cohesive events, and create their own dialog as they go along. There are at least two interacting roles in each scenario (for instance, a hotel clerk and guest). Students rehearse the scenario in groups, with the teacher acting as consultant and coach. One student from each group is then selected for each role. A post-performance debriefing allows discussion of the dialog generated. Subsequent performance by another group may produce an altogether different dialog. Several issues in second language acquisition emerge from this method: Can interactions be graded in degrees of complexity? What relationship exists between gestural and verbal communication? and Is there a correlation between success in dramatic interaction and the Foreign Service Institute's proficiency levels? (MSE)

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The Element of Drama in Strategic Interaction

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The essence of drama has been discussed by playwrights and scholars alike ever since classical times. Each writer has focussed on some element that is considered essential in good theater. Giuseppe Verdi, for example, spoke of the need to find the 'parola scenica,' or 'scenic word.' Verdi was a demanding composer who fussed over libretti so that the most effective language would be fitted to his music. In adapting Shakespeare's Othello to musical drama, for example, Verdi shortened the main protagonist's final lines:

> I kissed thee ere I killed thee: no way but this;
> Killing myself, to die upon a kiss

to let the music remind us of the love duet between Otello and Desdemona in the first act. To strains reminiscent of that early duet, Verdi has Otello say only:

> un bacio, ancora un bacio... (a kiss, just one more...)

The use of both music and language in opera allows an economy of expression that does not reduce the dramatic impact of Shakespeare's original spoken play.

As a linguist and a foreign-language teacher, I find that my interests in drama have taken a central position in language use in the classroom. It is difficult to define the dramatic element of language but, nevertheless, it is apparent that its presence in dialog enhances learning. Perhaps the key element in dramatic dialog is tension. There is an interactional tension that leads people to search for just the right thing to say. Let me recite an anecdote here: some years ago, a woman studying linguistics under my direction told me that she could still remember how to say, in Arabic, 'there's water on the bathroom floor.' Although she was not in any way a fluent speaker of Arabic, she recalled that, one day, during a stay in a Cairo hotel,

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there was water on the floor of the bathroom. Fearing a leak, she telephoned down to the desk clerk and reported the incident in her incipient Arabic. In recounting this episode to me, some 20 years after it took place, she confessed to having forgotten most of what she had learned in Arabic--except for that expression.

What was it that made it possible for such a mundane expression to be retained in this woman's memory? The only explanation I could offer myself was that the tension of the moment made it memorable. We have all had similar episodes in life at which times, we said something that we will never forget. The implications for second language learning were there for us to build upon. First of all, we can consider the poor results at retention that often come from hours of pattern practice and repetition--two practices featured by the audiolingual method. The spectre of a commanding teacher standing in front of a classroom full of learners forcing them to repeat over and over is still a vivid reality. Everything about such a scene is artificial: one dominant teacher vs. scores of subordinate students; the mouthing of dialogs that are 'canned' and have no base in context in which the students find themselves; and the focus on the correctness of what is being said rather than on the meaning that is being conveyed. It is no wonder that many teachers claim not to follow a strict audiolingual approach but also use grammatical explanation and translation as techniques in the classroom.

Perhaps the time has come for us to stop apologizing about our methods. If we are humanists, then we should act like humanists and not be afraid to adjust our use of language in the classroom to reflect the many ways that humans use language naturally. Among those ways we include, of course, the conveyance of information about a wide range of topics from the weather to how to arrange a trip through France. But beyond this use of language--which seems to occupy most of the attention of language teachers--lie two other categories of uses: a transactional one and an interactional one. Transactionally, language becomes pragmatic.

How many ways can you get someone to close a window in Italian:

Fa freddo, no? 'It's cold, isn't it?'

Mi sento freddo. 'I feel cold.'

Non ti senti freddo? 'Don't you feel cold?'

and, along with many others, the direct

Chiudi la finestra! 'Close the window.'

A good language learner soon realizes that there is no one-to-one ratio in verbal transactions of most kinds.

Even more important than the transactional dimension of language is its function in role presentation (or interaction). Each of us learns how to use our own language to give an image of ourselves to others. We learn how to interpret roles so that we emerge as individuals. There cannot be much individualism in a classroom where all the students are forced either to repeat semantically empty dialogs or play stereotyped roles.

The alternative to the above-mentioned practices is to insert some drama into classroom interaction. The strategic interaction method is, as a matter of fact, based on the principle that dramatic tension is the essential engredient in second-language learning. However, unlike the drama that is built in an audience watching a play, our type of classroom drama builds within each of the students involved in the interaction. The device used to promote the dramatic use of language is called the 'scenario.' The scenario is a thematically cohesive event in which humans perform actions that are purposeful to each of them. Students are not called upon to perform a play or a skit that someone has written for them. Instead, they create their own dialog as they go along.

There are at least two interacting roles in a scenario. Each role has a vested interest that dove-tails with the opposing role but is not in complementation with it. For example: Role A may be the part of someone who has reserved a room in a hotel. It is critical that this person have a room to rest in because an important business meeting is to take place the following day. Role B is given to another student who is asked

to assume the part of a desk clerk in a hotel. The hotel is overbooked and the supervisor has informed the desk clerk that he or she must convince at least 10% of guests holding reservations to give up their rooms. Failure to do so will result in dismissal. Before allowing the students to interact, they are given a rehearsal phase, in separate groups. Neither side knows all the details of the other's role and neither knows exactly what the other will say. As a result, the rehearsal groups must prepare something to say and anticipate what the other side might say, in response. The teacher plays the part of a coach and consultant, moving from group to group. When a sufficient time has passed for the rehearsal, a representative is elected from each group to play the part of the interactor. After the performance, there is a debriefing period during which all students and the teacher discuss the dialog that was generated by the scenario. The teacher may point out errors in grammar and pronunciation during this phase and ask the students to provide correct forms. In doing so, the teacher does not abandon the role of coach because the students realize that they are all working toward making the dialog more effective.

Other students may wish to interact in the same scenario. It is altogether possible that an entirely different dialog will emerge since each party negotiates with language, offering the other a series of options to which to respond and hoping that the option chosen will further one's personal ends. There is misfiring, ambiguity, and all the other phenomena that occur when people engage in interaction that does not have an assured or predictable outcome.

The use of scenarios brings to the forefront several issues of great significance for the theory of second-language acquisition:

(1) Can interactions be graded in terms of degrees of complexity? In other words, do some interactions require more verbal content than others?

(2) What relationship, if any, obtains between gestural communication and verbal content in scenarios? Most, if not all, of our

currently popular methods of second-language teaching make no effort to address gestural fluency as part of their pedagogy. In strategic interaction, we view gestural activity as an integral part of communication.

(3) Is there a correlation between success or relative success in dramatic interaction and the levels of proficiency set up by the FSI? The FSI scales place negotiation at the higher levels yet we have observed that students with just the barest of communicational skill can negotiate if given the opportunity (see Lantolf and Khanji 1982, for an elaboration of this point).

A dramatic approach to language learning may provide a solution to the problem of inequities in classroom discourse. Treichler and Kramarae (1983), writing about women's inequities in higher education, find that interaction in the typical university classroom favors a male-dominant sytle, in so far as it led by an authority figure (the teacher) and is argumentative in nature. When Treichler and Kramarae (1983, p. 122) write that "the contemporary college classroom is for most students a place of steadfast noninvolvement", their comments apply most assuredly to the typical foreign-language classroom, as well. The strategic interaction method provides for a range of classroom interaction-types: Students interact <u>au pair</u> with other students in planning out and performing scenarios. Males and females work together in groups and no particular style is given preference. The teacher, rather than being a dominating figure, becomes a coach and source of knowledge about the target language.

To be sure, we have much to learn about how discourse functions. We in the language-teaching profession can take a giant step forward if we will stop trying to squeeze discourse into some sort of grammatical straitjacket or make it conform to a set of disjointed speech functions. Thinking dramatically about discourse is at least not as difficult as trying to keep abreast of the many theoretical claims about grammar put forth by researchers who do not teach in classrooms full of foreign language learners.

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